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ABSTRACT

Teachers in the content areas of the curriculum must expend effort and use ingenuity in motivating students to learn the literacy skills of listening, speaking, thinking, reading, writing, and computing. To foster this enthusiasm for learning, seven elements are essential in any teaching strategy: interests (knowing the students' interests and providing materials that will make them want to read); visibility (recognizing and displaying student achievements); involvement (allowing students to participate in the class presentation); relevance (relating the learning content to the life experiences of the students); "effectance" (involving the principles of sequence, consistency, and continuity in teaching skills), expectancy (conveying confidence in the student's ability to master the learning task); and attitude and set (creating a positive classroom atmosphere in which the students feel accepted by the teacher and their peers). (HAI)

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TEACHING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE LITERACY SKILLS

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THE NEED TO INCREASE LITERACY

Francis Bacon once said, "The pleasure and delight of knowledge far surpasseth all others in nature." In the sixteenth century, knowledge in the context of learning was undoubtedly a delight--and a rare one. Few men and fewer women were sufficiently literate to acquaint themselves with the knowledge thus far accumulated. Yet, proportionately, the situation is not much different in the twentieth century. It has been estimated that the total body of knowledge has almost doubled every ten years since the turn of the century. It also has been estimated that 74% or more of the world's population today is illiterate. So far, no one has cared--or dared--to estimate the percentage of this population that is literate enough to enjoy the "pleasure and delight" of knowledge. As Bormuth points out (1974), "Literacy is an undeniably great benefit, but only to the literate."

In the United States, the percentage of illiteracy is considerably lower than that estimated for the world as a whole. Our public school system provides a free education, through high school, for all children who are physically and mentally able to attend school. This nation spends billions of dollars annually to educate its citizens. Yet despite the affluence of the public school system, an alarming number of students leave school as functional illiterates. Many high school teachers and administrators attribute this to the fact that these students simply cannot read their textbooks effectively. Their school careers have been blighted with frustration and failure. By the time they have reached junior high school, they have lost interest in the learning process and have no incentive to continue. Many leave school as soon as they reach the minimum legal age. We say that they have "dropped out," but actually they have never really been "in."

KEYS TO ACHIEVEMENT IN LITERACY

In any learning situation, in or out of school, an essential for success is the desire to learn and to achieve. Most persons can learn skills if they want to learn and are willing to try. Physical education teachers seldom need to urge their students to learn a sport. For many students, the incentive is already present. However, teachers in the content area of the curriculum must expend effort and use ingenuity to make students enthusiastic about reading. In over fifteen years of research, the writer has isolated seven basic elements which teachers can use to instill in their students the desire to learn the literacy skills of listening, speaking, thinking, reading, writing, and computing.

Interest

When students are not interested in a subject, it is difficult to motivate them to read about it. A teacher needs to know what his students are interested in; then he must provide the reading materials that will make them want to read. This is especially important when teaching boys, for they have a narrower range of reading interests than girls. Girls tend to like all of the interests of boys, plus their own individual preferences. Boys, in general, show more enthusiasm for reading when the subject matter is unusual or exciting. In a research project with 300 fourth, sixth, and eighth-grade boys, the writer surveyed and rated their reading preferences with fifty different categories of story content. The top 12 categories included "Outdoor Life," "Explorations and Expeditions," "Sports and Games," "Sea Adventure," "Science Fiction," "Humor," "Mystery," "Outer Space," and "Fantasy." The least liked of the 50 categories were "Plays," "Family and Home Life," and "Poetry." Characteristics of writing style were also studied. Out of a total of 20 characteristics, the three most preferred were "Unusual Experiences," "Excitement," and "Suspense." The least preferred were "Family Love and Closeness," "Familiar Experiences," and "Qualities such as Anger, Hate, Cruelty, Fighting, or Brutality."

These preferences have remained relatively stable over the years since the study was made. Recent studies by independent investigators showed that most of the twelve highly-favored categories were still preferred by boys. Marchese and Donia (1976) used the twelve Stanchfield categories and a similar survey procedure in a study with 244 fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade boys. Their ratings showed that "Sports and Games," "Explorations and Expeditions," and "Sea Adventure" were the three top choices. In considering these preferences, it seems clear that students need to be provided with reading material that is dynamic and exciting.

Visibility

When a student's achievements are made visible, he can recognize the importance of literacy skills and can see the results of his success in learning these skills. The class room can be a showcase where a pupil's work is made visible. Bulletin boards, displays for special projects, and charts for individual progress call attention to his activities and create interest in those of his classmates.

Visibility also encompasses a variety of tangible incentives for learning. Awards for improvement or success intensify a student's efforts. Teachers will find that it is well worth the investment to obtain printed certificates, plaques, or trophies for individual achievements and to award these in special recognition ceremonies.

A direct and personal kind of visibility is perceived in teacher contact with students. The teacher's praise of an individual's efforts or achievements create a sense of pride and a determination to achieve more. This positive attitude can be strengthened by teacher contact with parents, through letters which extend individual recognition to the home.

Visibility of student achievement is a factor which stimulates enthusiasm and makes the classroom a source of recognition and confidence. When

individual efforts are spotlighted, boys and girls enjoy a feeling of accomplishment and pride. Their creativity is stimulated and they become enthusiastic about learning and achieving.

Involvement

Students need to become actively involved in the learning process. Many classrooms are predominantly teacher-directed; there is much verbalization but little real communication or real meaning. For maximum growth and success, there should be intellectual, emotional, and physical involvement on the part of each student.

The research of Krech (1968) at the University of California is significant with regard to involvement. Dr. Krech experimented with rats to determine a safe and natural way to stimulate the growth of brain cells. He hypothesized that the stimulating effect of involvement and activity would increase the size of the brain and produce more intelligent animals. His experimental rats were given a variety of things to do. Each day they had opportunities to explore and to experience new things. They were also given individual attention by petting them and talking to them. The results of this research have significant implications for teachers because it was found that through involvement and activity, the brains of the experimental rats had grown larger and heavier than those of the control animals.

In the classroom, the positive effects of involvement can be demonstrated in many ways. In the writer's research in reading with students in the elementary school, the teachers used individual chalkboards, pocket charts, slates, and flannelboards to teach vocabulary skills with individual behavioral responses. Dramatization, puppetry, and flannelboard stories were also used for active language involvement. These experiences were related to the content of the students' readers. The pupils became vicariously in-

volved in story situations and their reading achievement increased significantly. These activities also helped to develop their listening and speaking skills, which are essential to the literacy process.

Relevance

Another important key to achievement in literacy is relevance--the meaning and relationship of school life to the life of the student. The varied backgrounds of our school population call for teaching materials which deal with concepts that students understand and situations with which they can identify. Reading texts that reflect their ethnic and cultural backgrounds help boys and girls to fit naturally into the school environment and to develop positive self-images. Games are helpful in making learning experiences relevant. Students can learn a wide variety of skills through activities that have been adapted from games they have played outside school. Familiar card games, such as "Rummy," "Casino," and "Fish" can be used to teach a variety of vocabulary skills at all grade levels. "Bingo," "Scrabble," and playing-board games can also be adapted to teach comprehension skills.

The principle of relevance is applicable in other areas at upper-grade levels. A rich resource of reading materials can be tapped by asking, "What do my students need to read in order to accomplish certain tasks or objectives?" The answers will include driver's license applications, job applications, and how-to-do-it manuals. The daily newspaper is a valuable source of relevant reading material. Students will read with interest the sections that appeal to them, such as the sports pages, the classified ads, and the movie and television sections. Television itself is an excellent way to make the curriculum more relevant. A publication called The Teacher's Guide to Television lists programs four to six months in advance, so that home-

work assignments can be made for programs that are relevant to today's society.

Effectance

"Effectance," a word coined by Robert White, is the ability of an individual to deal effectively with a task. Effectance in one task encourages the learner to try another task. In the teaching of literacy skills, this factor must be recognized, because success encourages more success and failure promotes more failure. Teachers must break the cycle of failure and insure success by teaching each skill satisfactorily at one level before going on to the next higher level. Each skill must be taught and practiced and, if necessary, retaught and reinforced until mastery is achieved. This sense of mastery or effectance releases drive and persistence--qualities that are essential to learning.

There are three principles of learning that contribute to effectance and success in the teaching of literacy skills. These are the principles of sequence, consistency, and continuity. The principle of sequence is applied when skills are taught in progressive order from the less difficult to the more difficult. Each skill must be taught and retaught as necessary before going on to the next level. For example, in the teaching of reading--a major literacy skill--it is relatively easy to maintain sequential development when presenting vocabulary skills. Logically, single consonants are taught before blends, and blends before digraphs. With comprehension skills, it is more difficult to establish a hierarchy of complexity. In general, however, the literal skills, such as reading for details, should be taught before going into the higher-level interpretive skills, such as making inferences, drawing conclusions, or determining main ideas.

The principle of consistency is applied by teaching a skill and then giving

independent practice in that specific skill until it is mastered. For some students, many repeated practices are necessary before the learner is able to go on to the next skill.

The principle of continuity is applied by maintaining the skills taught in developmental reading throughout the grades and into high school. It also involves the transfer of those skills to the content areas. Transfer of reading skills to other subjects is essential if students are to read their textbooks with fluency and understanding.

Expectancy

A dynamic factor in learning--and one that is often ignored--is that of expectancy. This is a principle that teachers can, and should, practice every day. An important part of expectancy is exemplified by the teacher who looks into a pupil's eyes and says, "You can do it. I know you can do it. I'll help you--will you try?" A student needs to feel that his teacher cares whether or not he learns, and expects him to achieve. A teacher's expectancy of pupils tends to become self-fulfilling.

A number of research studies have been made to determine the effect of a teacher's expectations upon students' achievement. In one well-known study, Rosenthal (1968) tested students, then selected certain individuals at random and informed their teachers that they had been identified through the testing as "potential spurters." When the pupils were tested again at the end of the school year, it was found that they actually had "spurted." The researcher concluded that when a teacher expects students to achieve, they will, indeed, achieve.

Five years later, Rosenthal (1973) examined the phenomenon of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" and studied the influences that tended to produce this effect. He found that teachers who had high expectations of certain stu-

dents created a warm mood for these individuals, gave them more feedback about their performance, gave them more opportunities and more time to respond, and sometimes cued their responses. The teachers also provided special materials for supposedly high-potential students and made extra efforts to teach them.

Attitude and Set

An important element that stimulates learning is that of attitude and set--or the way a person feels when approaching a situation. If students come to class feeling anger, hostility, or disinterest, it is difficult for them to learn to read or write. If pupils don't feel good about school and don't want to learn, there is not much a teacher can do without changing their attitudes. He can do much to change negative attitudes by getting to know his students and by talking to them in individual conferences. In this way, he lets them know he cares about their learning.

Research reported through the American Medical Association (Kirsh, 1968) revealed that there were two factors which were strong predictors of success in school. The first was the way a student feels about himself--his self-concept. If a student has the feeling that he is a failure, and if the school experience has been a mirror to reflect his failure, then his learning is completely negative. He has learned that he has little or no worth, that he can't learn, that his teachers have no use for him. He has learned to hate school, to hate the establishment, and to hate teachers. He has learned this well, and it is difficult to reverse this attitude. The teacher's first step in changing such an attitude must be to show the student that he cares about him. Teachers must not be so dedicated to textbook teaching that they forget the students for whom the textbooks were written. They must sincerely care about their students and must try to melt hostility and negativity with the kind of warmth that is essential to release potential.

A second predictor of success in school was reported by Kirsh to be the

way a student feels about his teacher and his classmates. Many boys and girls who are not part of a peer group may feel that they don't belong and that they are unimportant. These students have little incentive to strive for success in school. Students need to have a feeling of worth and a sense of belonging in order to achieve at a high level of proficiency. The teacher must be sensitive to this need and be ready to help the shy or awkward individual to make friends and to join in group activities.

THE VISION OF LITERACY

The prospect of raising standards of literacy is a vision that glows and grows on the educational horizon. If this vision is to become a reality, teachers need to recognize and employ the factors that stimulate the desire to learn and to achieve. These factors--Interest, Visibility, Involvement, Relevance, Effectance, Expectancy, and Attitude-Set--are dynamic motivators that can release students' potential for achievement.

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